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Date: 31 July 1953

COUNTRY: Colombia

SUBJECT: Summary of Developments in the Rojas Coup

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SOURCE:

[REDACTED]

The attached

summary of events leading up to the ouster of Laureano Gomez as Colombian
chief of state was prepared for the editor of a publication dealing with
Hispanic - American affairs.

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Five years of a state of siege by a ruthless Conservative regime and, more recently, the persecution of dissident Conservatives produced a crisis within the Conservative Party itself which finally brought about the end of an intolerable situation. On June 13 Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in a swift and bloodless move deposed President Laureano Gómez. This ended the tyrannical control over the country which a very small clique had maintained, a clique which was about to continue itself in power by imposing one of the most reactionary constitutions ever drafted in Latin America.

Gómez' control of the handpicked Constitutional Assembly, which was to vote on this constitution, became doubtful when ex-President Mariano Ospina Pérez openly challenged President Gómez. Gómez, however, believed he had at least a small majority and the Assembly was scheduled to meet June 15. A caucus of the pro-Ospina delegates on the night of the twelfth showed, however, that they commanded a majority and it was decided that Ospina would be elected to preside instead of the Government's candidate, Luis Ignacio Andrade (H.A.R., VI;5). Faced with this situation Gómez the following morning called upon acting-President Roberto Urdaneta Arbeláez to demand that the Constitutional Assembly be postponed one month. He also demanded the retirement of pro-Ospina Chief of the Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Rojas Pinilla. This was to have been punishment for tortures inflicted on Felipe Echavarría Olózaga by lesser army officers. This wealthy Conservative had been detained in the first days of June by the Security Department of the Ministry of War, charged with plotting against the lives of several prominent members of political, military and social circles. Acting-President Urdaneta refused the first request

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because all the delegates to the Assembly were already in Bogotá and another postponement could not be justified. Also, he rejected the second demand because he considered it dangerous to depose the Chief of the Armed Forces without due investigation and military procedure. With regard to the Echavarría case, the Minister of War at that time, Lucio Pabón Núñez, in a speech made June 24 as Minister of Government of the new regime stated that on June 5 he had been summoned by Gómez to his house and been requested to free Echavarría, to which he replied he had no authority to intervene in an investigation which was already underway; that on subsequent days he had been approached first by Editor of El Siglo, Enrique Gómez Hurtado, and afterwards by Senator Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, both sons of President Gómez, to demand the punishment of the army officers who had tortured Echavarría. He said he had told the Gómez sons that such intervention as Minister of War would be interpreted as an official attempt to stop the investigation, since it was rumored that persons very close to the Government were involved in the Echavarría affair; and that he had taken this stand with the full backing of acting-President Urdaneta.

Confronted with Urdaneta's refusal, Gómez decided on the spot to reassume the Presidency from which he had been technically on leave of absence for 19 months. Immediately he called a Cabinet meeting to which he announced the step he had taken and his decision to fire the Chief of the Armed Forces at once. When Pabón Núñez repeatedly refused to carry out the order because he feared the reaction of the armed forces to such an irrational punishment of their chief, Rojas Pinilla, whom he believed to be innocent, knowing that the General had himself ordered an investigation of the mistreatment of Echavarría. Gómez reiterated his demand and finally fired Pabón Núñez. He appointed Minister of Public Works, Jorge Leyva, to take over the

duties of Minister of War, the first of which was to appoint Lieutenant General Régulo Gaitán Chief of the Armed Forces. When Leyva arrived at the barracks of the Batallón ^{Caldas} in the outskirts of Bogotá to be duly recognized as the new Minister of War, he was arrested by the guard.

In the meantime an army plane had been sent to Melgar, Tolima where General Rojas Pinilla was vacationing to bring him to Bogotá. Informed of the action taken against him, the General flew back and went immediately to the Batallón Caldas. There he met with high ranking officers and decided to order all forces in Bogotá to report to their units and assume a state of readiness, and to inform all military units in the country that he had assumed command of the Army, Air Force and Navy. At 5:35 p.m., while tanks were surrounding Laureano Gómez' house and the Presidential Palace, Rojas Pinilla notified Gómez that he had assumed the Presidency of the Republic in the name of the armed forces. He promised Gómez and his family all guarantees and said that they were free to leave the country for the destination of their choosing. Immediately he telephoned Urdaneta of his decision. At 7:10 p.m., accompanied by a numerous group of high ranking officers he entered the Presidential Palace where he was met by prominent pro-Ospina and pro-Alzate Conservatives. He then called the Conservative National Directory and Ospina Pérez to the Palace. At the same time in most of the state capitals Military Area Chiefs were taking over the governorships. At 10:00 p.m. the official radio station announced to a surprised country that a new President was in office.

Later on that evening General Rojas Pinilla addressed the country stating that he overthrew Gómez because of the "morally serious" situation created by his unconstitutional policies, and called for "no more bloodshed, no more violence in the name of a party, no more strife between Colombians". He also promised "clean elections" and that he would give the nation "genuinely democratic systems, legislative rulers and

judges which the Colombian people wish to chose in complete liberty". The following day General Rojas issued a statement explaining his actions in which it is declared that he had first asked President Urdaneta to reassume his office. When Urdaneta refused to do so without previous formal resignation from Gómez, only then, the General said, had he rescued the country from anarchy and chaos.

After prolonged discussion with Conservative leaders, an all-Conservative Cabinet composed of ten civilians and three army men was made public in spite of the fact that early bulletins over the national radio had announced that the new President would name some Liberals. Army officials were appointed to the Ministries of War, Communications and Agriculture. The civilians included several men known to be moderates, such recognized pro-Capina men as Evaristo Sourdís (H.A.R., VI; 4), to Foreign Relations, Antonio Escobar Camargo, to Justice, Alfredo Rivera Valderrama, to Development, Manuel Mosquera Garcés (H.A.R., VI; 5), to Education, Aurelio Caycedo Ayerbe, to Labor and Braulio Henao Mejía, to Health. The other men were studiously chosen from among those associated in the public mind with Gómez' extremist policies--men who in their own right were powerful in their home departments: Lucio Babón Núñez, to Government, Pedro Nel Rueda Uribe, to Mines and Petroleum, and Santiago Trujillo Gómez, to Public Works. The only one who did not accept was Antonio Alvarez Restrepo, able and non-political Minister of Finance for the last three years, who felt it was against his principles to change loyalties because of political expediency. A Cabinet so constituted and the support given to the new regime by Capina, Urdaneta and other high ranking Conservatives gave the coup the unusual appearance of a repudiation of Gómez by his own party. The coup was certainly not the usual rising of one party against another since the Liberals in no way participated in it.

The new government of Rojas Pinilla was enthusiastically and sympathetically by almost all of the country, notwithstanding that it was the first time in almost a hundred years that the army had struck. This non-political tradition of the army had been cherished by all Colombians and the two main parties had rallied to this tradition after the Bogotazo of 1948 in order to prevent the formation of a military junta, the solution proposed by Gómez at that time. The complacency of the people in the face of the coup may be explained by the fact that they did not feel that the iniquity, tyranny and cruelty of the regime which had brought the country almost to the verge of chaos constituted a legal government. Furthermore, they felt that the army's action stopped the establishment of a personal dictatorship which Gómez' clique hoped to effect through constitutional "reform" giving unlimited and unrestrained power over a Fascist-like corporate state. This fact alone would have gained the sympathy of the opposition for the coup. But the first address made to the country by General Rojas Pinilla with its encouraging promises was an added factor. It received the endorsement of the Liberal leaders and gave hope to the nation as a whole of recovering sincere and complete peace and the reestablishment of republican institutions.

The new President installed the Constitutional Assembly on June 15 as scheduled. Almost unanimously, Ospina was elected to preside over it, thus re-emerging as the civilian head of the Conservative Party. The Assembly formalized the status of Rojas Pinilla by declaring the office of the President vacant since June 13 and electing him to complete Gómez' term which expires August 7 of next year. Before recessing for a period of sixty days to formulate a new project of amendments to the Constitution, the Assembly decreed that in the event that the Government felt conditions were not proper to conduct presidential elections next year, the Assembly should be convoked to elect the president for the next term.

tained when they charged that Gómez intended to use such a procedure against Ospina to circumvent popular suffrage.

The endorsement of Rojas Pinilla by the Church was made public when Crisanto Cardinal Luque, Archbishop Primate of Colombia, ordered that the General's authority be recognized as the legal ruler. This stand was taken only when a committee of lawyers called together by the Cardinal, after prolonged discussion, decided that the endorsement of the General by the Constitutional Assembly was sufficient to clear the Constitutional issue. The ^{unusually} prompt recognition given the new regime by many foreign governments, among them the United States, indicated that the change was well received internationally.

Ex-President Gómez accompanied by his wife and his two sons, Alvaro and Enrique who had also been detained, left the country on June 17 for New York where they remained at the end of the month. Only a handful of non-political, family friends were at the airport to see him off, although his departure had been previously announced.

The popularity of the new government was evidenced by many public demonstrations including those by students and by women's organizations in Bogotá. These have followed certain concrete and hopeful actions of the regime to materialize the promises made by the President. Complete amnesty has been granted to the guerrillas, who have already begun to give themselves up to military commanders in Antioquia, Tolima and Santander. Measures have been taken to return political refugees to their farms beginning with those from Yacopí, La Palma and the Llanos. National and local police have been integrated and placed under the control of the armed forces. Their new military commanders have issued and enforced strict regulations concerning their discipline and the fulfillment of their duties without political bias. The National Prefect of Security, Gómez appointed Enrique Vargas Orjuela,

along with many of the secret police charged with crimes and political persecution, were imprisoned the same day of the coup and investigations were immediately initiated into their past activities. Also, there has been some easing of the censorship of the press. For instance, the complete silence enforced concerning the investigation of the assassination in 1951 of the Chief of the ^{Office of} Exchange Control, Alonso Jaramillo Sanchez, has been lifted. As a result charges of extreme gravity against Enrique Vargas Orjuela and the secret police have caused the reopening of the investigation of a crime which because of its circumstances, the importance of the victim and its grave implications had caused such grave national concern until censorship had suppressed all discussion of it.

Rojas Pinilla's popularity has further increased with his repeated insistence that the army movement can not be capitalized on by one faction, but only by the nation as a whole. In this way the President has denied statements by Conservative politicians attempting to convey the idea that there has been no change in the Conservative regime, only a shift in personalities. Some Conservative newspapers have made frantic pleas for party unity to salvage the continuity of the Conservative regime and have attempted to revive fear of Liberal ascendancy. The fact that these partisan views have not gained ground has increased hopes that this is not just another military junta, but that the army will live up to the responsibility it assumed of regaining justice and freedom for all and restoring the country to the democratic tradition.

The Liberal newspaper El Tiempo on June 14 reached its thirty-fifth year of publication. On the occasion of its fifteen thousandth edition, its owner, Eduardo Santos, and the Editor, Roberto García Peña, received copious plebiscites of praise for its outstanding defense of freedom and justice and the democratic ideals.

On June 27 Dr. Milton Eisenhower arrived at Bogotá on his goodwill tour through South America. He was heartily received. His first words were of praise for the Colombian units fighting in Korea. El Siglo urged Dr. Eisenhower to keep Protestant pastors out of Colombia. He was also given a letter signed by 300 Roman Catholics criticizing what they termed anti-Colombian propaganda in some United States religious organs.

The new government announced its intention of following the same economic policies of encouraging foreign investment for economic development, mentioning specifically the petroleum industry. Economic stability and a balanced budget were two other goals mentioned.

The United States-Colombian commercial treaty was withdrawn from consideration by the United States Senate, by the Administration, after previous consultation with Colombia, pending the outcome of the constitutional reform.